



From the Creu Roja exhibit *Salut en conflicte*, photographed in Angola in January 2002 by Ursula Meissner

Breaking the silence

CT speaks to doctors whose life's work is to help victims of torture

ALEX LEFF

For Patricia Jirón, a typical day can include first-hand accounts of human rights' violations. She works at Exil, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) started more than 25 years ago by another Chilean, Jorge Barudy. The five-year old Barcelona branch provides counselling for hundreds of immigrants who survived torture or ill-treatment.

Jirón is the daughter of a famous torture victim. Arturo Jirón was the health minister and physician of former Chilean President Salvador Allende. Jirón was with Allende until his final moment, during the 1973 military coup, before being captured by Pinochet's soldiers.

"He suffered all kinds of torture and humiliation," said Patricia Jirón. Her father has been back in Chile since the dictatorship crumbled in 1990, after the family took exile in Venezuela.

"The physical oppression was directed at my father," Jirón said, "but the whole family suffered." These past experiences, she said, help her build a rapport with patients at Exil, which assisted 205 people last year, more than 60 per cent from Latin America.

Amid a raging international debate on torture, Jirón is one in a small group of specialists who dedicate their lives to helping those whose human rights were violated either by their governments, families or community members.

Although banned by international law, torture continues to be practised in more than 100 countries. Some governments are criticised for double talk: while the US has rewritten its rules on interrogation methods, more torturers, such as a British soldier who recently admitted systematic abuse of prisoners,

are being brought forward.

But victims are also speaking out. In the recent film *The Road to Guantánamo*, based on the story of three British Muslims who were held in Guantánamo Bay for two years until they were released without charge.

The good news for the victims, doctors say, is that it is possible to regain one's life again, after the fear that it would be taken away by torturers. The International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT), an umbrella non-governmental organisation with al-



Danish anti-torture activists, Inge Genefke and Bent Sørensen/ o.v.

most 200 centres, treats more than 100,000 victims a year, providing counselling, and training community teachers and nurses to help victims break the silence.

Danish founder of IRCT, Inge Genefke, who pioneered this work, says the effects that persist after torture are deeper than the physical wounds. The doctor was invited by the Red Cross to speak at the opening of the organisation's multimedia exhibit *Salut en Conflicte* (Health in Conflict; at Barcelona's La Casa Elizalde until October 6).

Genefke's brainchild, the IRCT, provided the research for the film, *The Secret Life of Words*, by the celebrated Catalan filmmaker, Isabel Coixet. Genefke praised the director: "It's difficult to talk about torture, because it is such a horrible experience that there is no language for

it. Isabel found the language."

Coixet would not have found the words, however, if Genefke hadn't first laid out the lexical framework. The doctor's research began in 1973 when she was on the board of Amnesty International in Denmark, and the NGO gave her the task of forming the first medical team to diagnose victims of torture. "It took us a lot of years to figure out how to help them. When I started there was a big zero in research, now our documentation centre in Copenhagen has 50,000 items," said Genefke.

Genefke, too, is the daughter of a torture victim. "I am a war child and my father was in the resistance against the Nazis. I've known about torture since I was little. But we were not aware of the psychological after-effects."

She continued: "We now know about the deep anxiety and depression, the nightmares, reduced memory, feelings of shame and guilt."

"Justice heals"

Once the wounds are bandaged, the victim has undergone psychological counselling and feels re-integrated into society, the IRCT has found that the best cure is reparation. "Justice heals," the Genefke concurs.

Recent events show the scales of justice are beginning to tip. An Argentinean court recently sentenced a retired police commissioner to life in prison for crimes committed during the country's "dirty war".

Critics say the US government, however, is repeating the mistakes of "dirty war" nations such as Argentina and Chile, in enacting a law that protects government operatives who have committed or are responsible for human rights abuses. The US is still under fire for its alleged

THE TALE OF A NIGERIAN REFUGEE

"Most people died in prison"

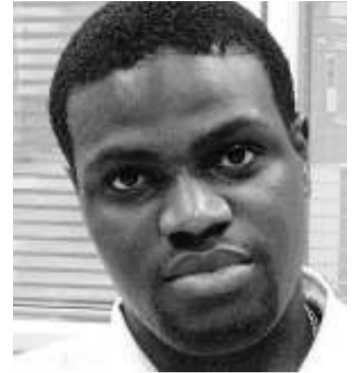
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Emmanuel Amaechi Nwanam, 30, longs to see the independence of his people, the Igbos, one of Nigeria's three largest ethnic groups. His activism with the outlawed Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra was cut short when the government deployed troops on a peaceful protest in southeastern town of Onitsha.

Massob claims the Igbos have long been marginalised, they do not have top positions in government, and their region's roads and infrastructure have been neglected.

A protest organiser, Nwanam was thrown in jail. "While in prison, most people died," he said, describing a sort of roulette. "It's a very horrible experience: sitting with a group and suddenly the prison guard comes and [pointing at the inmates] says 1, 2, 3, 4, come with me. That's the end. You hear the sound of a gun and you know the people are gone... you don't know who will be next."

He was released "unofficially" and forced to secretly



flee north to Spain. He first chose to the Basque Country and then Catalonia as stopping grounds, "because I'd read about their fight for independence," he said. While waiting for asylum in Spain, the after-effects set in. "I was confused, I couldn't think straight." He said the Exil centre in Barcelona provided a safe space to talk, and he has since been able to resume doing things he enjoys, "working with my hands and reading". For Nwanam, however, the future is bleak for Nigeria, which he says is full of corruption and stained with the blood of his people. "Before you can talk about peace you must first find out what triggered the problem."

abuses at secret prisons, for Guantánamo, and reports that torture in Iraq is worse than under Saddam Hussein.

The debate in the US has focused on the Geneva Convention, which should safeguard detainees against ill-treatment. But a different international accord, the UN Convention Against Torture, is noticeably absent from public discourse, said Bent Sørensen, Genefke's husband. Also a doctor and companion in combatting torture, Sørensen served on the UN Committee Against torture and on a similar board for Europe.

Sørensen cites the advantages of the UN document over the Geneva Convention: "It is always in force, while the Geneva Convention is only enforced during war. So Bush's debate whether Guantánamo detainees are prisoners of war is irrelevant if you're talking about torture."

If anyone in power bends the rules, they should pay, the couple agrees. For example, US secretary of defence, Donald Rumsfeld, should be brought before a world court for signing a list of torture methods used at the Abu Ghraib prison.

"You can get a lot of in-

formation, some if it may be true, most is not," Sørensen said, about a study of the information gathered by interrogating the prisoners in Abu Ghraib, Iraq, which found information was more accurate without torture. Sørensen believes progress had been made in reducing torture in Spain, where Amnesty International has repeatedly complained of police brutality and torture of terror suspects.

In terms of funding treatment, however, Spain is a major donor to the UN Voluntary Fund for the Victims of Torture, says Karen Sherlock, an IRCT advisor based in Barcelona. Spain contributes €300,000 to the fund, 90 per cent backed by the US. The IRCT is trying to pressure the UK to follow suit, as Sherlock says it only gives \$260,000. "Spain should be patted on the back," she said.

Meanwhile, the time dedicated by trained doctors seems to go a long way. Jirón, the Chilean psychologist, described patients recovering and getting on with their life. She says: "My work helps me put the puzzle of my past together... People ask if I suffer. I suffer with every patient, but never as badly as they did."